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ABSTRACT

Parents have the legal right to send their children to private schools. This paper presents findings of a survey that compared the opinions of sitting school board presidents (n=1,500) with those of Chamber of Commerce executives (n=1,300) across the United States. The survey asked each group about their attitudes toward charter schools, privatization, and vouchers. Chamber of Commerce respondents, who were members of the business community, were more positive than school board members in their support for charter schools, privatization, and vouchers. The majority of the business leaders favored expanding charters to private schools, while the majority of board members opposed expansion. Chamber of Commerce members believed that educational changes should be driven from outside the school system, and board members expressed support for the status quo. Board members believed that public schools could improve through internal measures. The majority of school board members disagreed with voucher options that would allow students to attend any school, allow students to attend schools in surrounding school districts, and allow students to attend religious schools. (Contains 11 references, 8 tables, and 1 figure.) (LMI)

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Public School Choice Initiatives:
Perceptions of Business / Industrial Leaders and School Board Members

The nation's schools are at a crossroad. Schools have become out-of-sync with modern societal expectations by developing bureaucratic monopolies which cannot last . Public education, while implementing restructuring and reform at glacial speed, faces an impatient constituency that sees reform and restructuring as the critical factor in the survival of public education (Gerstner, Semerad, Doyle & Johnston, 1994). The legacy of American education experiencing change as a result of internal efforts has been replaced. Public opinion now indicates that change should be entrepreneurial in nature and strongly influenced by external forces. Entrepreneurial efforts include privatization, charter schools and vouchers. America is not alone. Other English-speaking nations face similar challenges as evidenced in England, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The most common thread emerging from public opinion is a strong support of choice through a number of different avenues which is reflected consistently through the *Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1994). The nation's governors embraced choice in public schooling as a means of promoting innovative programs, increasing parent involvement, challenging teachers, and as a means to provide more immediate change (National Governors Association, 1991). The key issue for educators is how to respond to the

overwhelming momentum of public expectation of the significant involvement of the private sector in a new system of public education (Friedman, 1995; Walthers, 1995).

As we approach the end of the twentieth century with the intensifying debate over public education, we would do well to revisit the Pierce Case (Pierce v. Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, 1925). In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a state could not force all parents to send their children between the ages of 8 and 16 to public school. Parents, the high court said, had the liberty of directing the education of their children. The Pierce Case evoked other cases and other opinions on the use of public funds to educate all children, and what we now know as the "Child Benefit" (Cochran v. Louisiana State Board of Education, 1930) doctrine was born. Today, the primary issues are how parents should or can exercise that "liberty" and just how far we as a society should go in allowing dollars to "follow or benefit the child." The forums for these issues are privatization, charter schools and the use of vouchers. While the issue of privatization is somewhat new to our generation, charters and vouchers are not, as they have appeared in some form in earlier decades. For an example, some would argue, with some merit, that the GI Bill was a form of voucher and that both the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land grant colleges, and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which established Vocational Education programs, were forms of charters. School Boards now contract school services at an increasing

rate with private contractors that promise lower costs and improved performance (Townley, 1995). A survey conducted in the fall of 1995 compared the opinions of sitting School Board Presidents with the opinions of Chamber of Commerce Executives. A national random sample of 1500 school board members was surveyed. The research effort received the cooperation of the National Association of School Boards and the American Chamber of Commerce Executives. All 1300 local Chamber of Commerce executives were surveyed. Generally, School Board presidents represent public school governance while Chamber of Commerce executives represent the business and industrial community. The survey addressed privatization, school charter and voucher issues. School Board members were expected to be knowledgeable about charter, privatization and voucher concepts because they avail themselves of training provided by local affiliates of the NSBA and by local educators. Chamber of Commerce executives also proved to be knowledgeable. The Chamber of Commerce has long been recognized for its leadership efforts on behalf of communities, and this organization is to be commended for the level of knowledge expressed by state executives on the issues of public school charters, privatization efforts and vouchers. Participation in this study was greater by the Chamber of Commerce than by School Board members. It was thought that both groups represent the public, both groups have vital interests in public education and both groups would be actively involved in local education issues. The respondents divided along traditional attitudinal

perspectives. Chamber of Commerce executives' written comments were representative of the business and industrial community. Typical comments included the following.

> ...Current system is not working well. Professional educators (teachers and administrators) are incapable of acting in the interest of children at the expense of their own self-interests. Introducing market forces into the equation, while disconcerting and messy in the short-term, will redefine relationships. Eventually, results (i.e., what kids learn and the skills they acquire to continue learning) will count more than process, tenure and union contracts.

> Our education system is almost impervious to any dramatic change. Educators generally are defensive and quite skillful in resisting any proposed major departure from the status quo. They have little understanding and support for the concepts of competition and individual initiative, and aggressively resist any proposals that appear to threaten the traditional 'one-size fits all, no district gets more (or less) than any other district' system. It is pointless to expect educators trained in a system so resistive to individual initiatives and differences between districts to be enthusiastic about, and supportive of, innovative proposals for dramatically changing the system in which they've been trained and where they find professional security. **Change** must be driven from outside that system.

On the other hand, Board members embraced the more traditional established public education attitudes about charters, privatization and voucher efforts as a means of improvement. Typical responses ran along the line of the comments below.

> "Public education works to expose all walks of life to each other. Separation by choice encourages separation, segregation and isolation by economics or religious or other

> breaks between citizens. The haves will have choice, the have-nots won't even realize there is choice."

> "I believe in our public school system as it now exists."

> "I firmly believe that the new concepts i.e. vouchers, charters, will mean the end to public education and will lead to more splintering of America as a nation."

> "Vouchers and privatization will cause deterioration of fundamental aspects of universal access to education and information which will result in disintegration of the democratic process."

> "I cannot understand how taking money **away** from public schools is going to make them better. We are struggling as it is to pass budgets that include enough money to keep our schools going. How can we make advancements in technology, innovation, attracting good teachers, maintaining clean and well-kept schools when charter and private schools are going to siphon off much needed funds?"

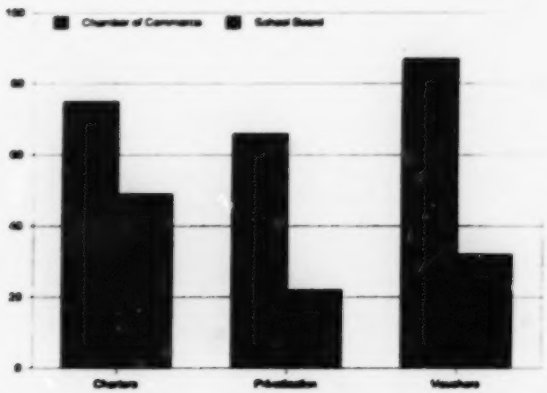
Perhaps the strongest opinions of Board members related to the sense of community and the ability of public schools to improve through completely internal measures.

> "Schools belong to their communities. It is up to each community to improve their school. If someone is unhappy with their school - help change it. If you want another school in another district - move there! **Public** funds are **public** dollars that should go to **public** schools. Private funds are private dollars for private schools."

> "Government should support public education and stop the experimenting as suggested in the questionnaire. Public education can and will adapt to changes through professional inservice training of teachers/administrators with the support of business and government."

Figure 1 graphically displays the percentage of respondents by groups who conceptually supported the use of public funds for school charters, privatization efforts and vouchers. Most noticeably, the Chamber of Commerce respondents were more positive in their support of the concepts of charters, privatization and vouchers.

Figure 1.



The School Charter Issue

Charter schools are granted varying degrees of exemption from state and local regulations by legislative action while still receiving state funds. In many respects, charter schools operate like private schools. Charter schools are entrepreneurial with each school choosing its focus and means to deliver services. Controversial in nature, the charter concept sometimes threatens public educators. The charter movement is growing phenomenaly with over 200 charter schools in

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America (Berlein, 1995). Perhaps the charter concept is best characterized as a movement without organizational structure or prominent advocates and with little, if any, support from the education establishment. The primary attraction is an opportunity for local educators to try out good ideas that they feel are appropriate to their school. Schools operating effectively with limited state or district controls certainly challenge the traditional concept of reform initiated from within. Charter schools change relationships between schools and school boards, often utilize true site-based decision-making, and provide non-traditional roles for teachers (Kolderie, 1994).

Survey participants were asked if more schools should adopt the charter school concept. Board members responded with a noticeable division of opinion while the Chamber of Commerce executives strongly supported more charter schools. Opinions were recorded on a Likert scale and are reported in percentage of respondents as follows:

Table 1
Opinions relating to more schools adopting the charter school concept

	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	13%	28%	16%	19%	24%
COC	24%	37%	18%	12%	9%

Additionally, respondents were asked if charters should only be granted to

individuals or organizations operating in the public sector or if private and parochial schools should be allowed to become charter schools. Opinions are reflected as follows:

Table 2
Opinions relating to the granting of charters to only public or including private / paroachial schools

	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
Public Sector:					
BOE	26%	29%	15%	17%	13%
COC	11%	19%	26%	24%	20%
Private/parochial:					
BOE	7%	13%	13%	23%	44%
COC	13%	33%	21%	16%	17%

Both groups' comments reflect a more limited knowledge of, and perhaps less interest in, the charter school concept than privatization or voucher issues. A number of respondents from both groups also expressed concerns about problems relating to various state charter legislation. When questioned about the extension of charters to private and parochial schools, the Chamber of Commerce executives indicate some reservations but generally show moderate support for including all schools in the charter concept. Conversely, board members strongly resist any attempts to include private and parochial schools in charter legislation.

In general, Board members are rather traditional in their support of the status

quo although their primary concern appears to be centered on the schools to which charters are extended rather than the existence of the concept/legislation. Board members want charters, if they are used at all, to be limited to those institutions operating in the public sector. Chamber of Commerce executives were generally supportive of the charter concept and were strongest in the areas of expanding the use of charters, though they were moderate in their support for the extension of charters to private and parochial schools.

The Privatization Issue

Privatization was defined for survey participants as the use of public funds to pay a private company/organization to manage public schools for profit or nonprofit. In 1988, when the Chelsea, Massachusetts School Committee contracted with the College of Education at Boston College to manage some of the schools within the district, the issue of privatization moved to the forefront of the debate. By 1989, Whittle Communications announced plans to establish The Edison Project, a school management group, for the express purpose of managing public schools for a profit. Other groups such as Public Strategies Incorporated in Minneapolis and Education Alternatives Incorporated in Baltimore were already in the foray . The Whittle concept was closely related to proprietary school initiatives that had demonstrated successful school management over a period of forty years. Traditionally, school boards have been more willing to contract with private

agencies for selected services than for overall management. Typical services include contracts with private transportation and institutional food service companies. Public and educator opinion on privatization issues tend to divide along the lines of for-profit and not-for-profit, management concerns, comparative costs, what type of services should be involved in private endeavors, and how private contractors should function in the public arena. Opinions reflecting support for the use of public funds in for-profit and not-for-profit schools are shown below.

Table 3
Opinions relating to the use of public in for-profit and not-for-profit schools

For profit:					
	strongly agree	**agree**	**no opinion**	**disagree**	**strongly disagree**
BOE	5%	5%	6%	14%	70%
COC	7%	28%	10%	28%	27%
Not-for-profit:					
	strongly agree	**agree**	**no opinion**	**disagree**	**strongly disagree**
BOE	9%	15%	7%	16%	53%
COC	12%	43%	13%	16%	16%

Board members and Chamber of Commerce executives usually represent highly skilled professionals, and they reflect both sharply divergent and common opinion in management areas of the privatization issue. Questions included privatization as the best way to hold school administrators more accountable, as a means to save

money for schools and taxpayers, as possibly encouraging corruption unless carefully regulated, as a means to motivate teachers to work harder and more efficiently, and as a way to control the influence of unions. Responses are as follows:

Table 4
Opinions relating to selected privatization issues

	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
Best way to hold school administrators accountable:					
BOE	5%	9%	8%	27%	51%
COC	16%	32%	18%	24%	10%
Will save money for schools and taxpayers:					
BOE	6%	12%	12%	26%	44%
COC	16%	46%	15%	17%	6%
Will cost taxpayers more and make little or no difference in the quality of schools:					
BOE	19%	30%	26%	16%	9%
COC	3%	9%	20%	41%	27%
Will encourage corruption unless carefully regulated:					
BOE	23%	41%	20%	8%	8%
COC	10%	28%	23%	31%	8%
Will control influence of unions:					
BOE	7%	48%	27%	12%	6%
COC	15%	42%	28%	11%	4%

In the area of cost and privatization, Chamber of Commerce executives surveyed agreed that privatization is likely to save money for schools and taxpayers. On the other hand, Board members felt just the opposite. The two groups were closer in agreeing that privatization might be a way of controlling the influence of unions. Perhaps the management-labor aspect is clear cut to both groups. Interestingly, both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the major teacher unions, have taken a negative posture on privatization issues.

In the area of contracting services, the type of services to purchase from private contractors was a major concern. Board members appeared more familiar with contracted services than school charters or vouchers as reflected in their comments. Chamber of Commerce execs were very enthusiastic in support of the use of privatizing services such as maintenance and transportation, and School Board members were more in agreement with support services than instructional services where there was strong disagreement. Chamber of Commerce executives were overwhelmingly in agreement with the concept of private involvement in instructional services, while only thirty percent of the Board members agreed. When the groups considered the privatizing of *all* educational services, opinion was drawn along expected lines. Board members surveyed were in opposition while Chamber of Commerce executives felt it was okay to privatize *all* educational services. A breakdown of the opinions of the two groups follows:

Table 5
Opinions relating to support for types of privatization

Support privatizing support services	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	24%	40%	18%	11%	7%
COC	51%	43%	4%	1%	1%
Support privatizing instructional services	**strongly agree**	**agree**	**no opinion**	**disagree**	**strongly disagree**
BOE	8%	17%	7%	31%	27%
COC	22%	48%	12%	13%	5%
Support privatizating all educational services	**strongly agree**	**agree**	**no opinion**	**disagree**	**strongly disagree**
BOE	9%	11%	7%	31%	42%
COC	19%	36%	15%	18%	12%

A final aspect of privatization relates to how private contractors function in the public arena. Most states have "sunshine" or open meeting laws under which School Boards must conduct affairs. When asked how Chamber of Commerce executives and School Board members felt about private contractors being subjected to the "sunshine" legislation, both agreed strongly that open meeting laws should apply to any public business, even if conducted by private groups. The major concern seems to center around the use of public monies as reported by a Chamber respondent who stated, "Public funds should not be available to any institution that does not operate under the same rules/regulations required of public institutions." A breakdown of opinions follows:

Table 6
Opinions relating to "subshine" laws

Support private contractors being subjected to "sunshine" laws:	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	66%	22%	5%	3%	4%
COE	34%	46%	10%	6%	4%

Comments relating to privatization generally centered on accountability, tenure and unionization. One Chamber executive expressed the tenor of opinions saying, "If schools were run like businesses, none of the above (charters /privatization /vouchers) would be an issue." Some Board Members agreed. A California Board member wrote, "Change is needed. The major problem is 'no accountability'. Every program ... must be working at optimum efficiency. Administrators have no understanding of accountability." A Chamber exec and an acknowledged former teacher, addressed the tenure issue by noting, there is a "need to get rid of tenure and make teachers more accountable ... also we need to pay our teachers more. Something is very wrong with a system that pays a teacher $25,000 to educate our future citizens." A number of Chamber and Board colleagues concurred.

The Voucher Issue

In surveying Chamber of Commerce executives and School Board members, vouchers were determined to be a grant, draft, or tax credit from public tax dollars

to be used at the discretion of the parents/guardian for the education of the child. Public opinion on the voucher issue is well documented with research and articles within and without the education profession. The premier annual research is reported in the *Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (Elam et. al) in a fall issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan.* Over a period of years, the public's acceptance has gradually gained momentum to a point where over half the nation's population now supports vouchers in some form. The continued growth in public support requires the consideration of eductors who are governed by public representatives. Perhaps vouchers are most attractive because they represent parental choice in an entrepreneurial sense. When parents choose, they are more likely to participate and to create educational opportunities for their children, and they feel more accountable for the end educational result (Kean, 1993).

Three survey items concerning vouchers addressed questions concerning the use of publicly-funded vouchers in allowing students to attend any school (public or private) within the district, allowing students to attend schools in surrounding districts, and allowing students to use vouchers to attend religious schools. The issue of publicly supported vouchers in private or religious schools evoked the most spirited comments from Board members who participated in the survey. These questions also produced the highest number of comments among the survey topics. The results follow:

Table 7
Opinions relating to the support of vouchers

Allow students to attend any school, public or private, within the district:					
	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	8%	10%	7%	25%	50%
COE	21%	35%	8%	18%	18%
Allow students to attend schools in surrounding districts:					
	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	9%	16%	8%	24%	43%
COE	19%	31%	12%	24%	14%
Allow students to attend religious schools:					
	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	6%	10%	7%	20%	57%
COE	15%	29%	13%	21%	22%

A final item regarding vouchers concerned eliminating the use of public funds for all vouchers. The opinions of each group are reported below:

Table 8
Opinions relating to the abandonment of the use of vouchers

Using public funds for vouchers should be abandoned:					
	strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
BOE	38%	22%	12%	15%	13%
COE	9%	12%	20%	36%	23%

Concerns relating to the use of vouchers focus on the issues of public or

private schools, in-district schools, any school in surrounding districts, religious schools, and achievement efforts. The disagreement between the two groups surveyed was dramatic and consistent on all questions concerning vouchers. In general, the Chamber of Commerce executives were supportive of the use of vouchers in all kinds of combinations; whereas, the Board members were strongly opposed. Chamber of Commerce executives were less enthusiastic about the subject of vouchers when the issue of religious schools was considered. Board members responded that the voucher concept should be abandoned while the Chamber of Commerce execs were strongly opposed to abandoning the idea of vouchers.

Concerns expressed by Board Members when discussing vouchers were the "cherry-picking" of students and the need of charter/private schools to "take the same responsibility as public schools, i.e. take all students who want to come -- they should not be able to send students back to public school for discipline problems or non-compliance." Another Board member who reported some experience with "open enrollment options" in his/her state indicated that " a competitive 'air' has been created. All districts appear to be trying harder to keep students from leaving for other districts. This has been a very positive move, and the public is getting more "bang for their buck!"

When the issue of charters, vouchers and privatizing used only for schools which are lagging academically was addressed, both groups of respondents were

strongly opposed. Indications are that the Board members did not want these reform measures used even when schools were in trouble. Conversely, the Chamber execs do not want to limit the use of charters, vouchers, and privatization efforts to schools which appear to be lagging in achievement. One respondent expressed the views of the Chamber best saying, "Schools need *more* options. Parents and taxpayers should have *more* options. The current system is not working. New concepts are needed!"

The survey indicated a clear division of opinion between School Board members which likely represent the traditional educational establishment, and Chamber of Commerce executives who represent the business and industrial community. The disturbing factor appears to be that School Boards are often "out-of-sync" with prevailing public opinion regarding public education. Authors Gerstner, Semerad, Doyle, and Johnston (1994) in *Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America's Schools* rightfully express this concern: "School boards are the linchpin of school governance, and their role must change if market forces are to make a difference in public schools of the future. " Pointing to the necessity of change, these highly successful representatives of business and industry point to the grim lessons learned when providers become noncompetitive; they change or go out of business unless they have access to a means of a monopoly to insulate themselves from the pressures of competition. America needs to take note! The public wants and needs greater choice in education.

Choice is available now to citizens with financial means and know-how. Choice is available by the community in which parents can afford to live, by private schooling, or by home schooling. Choice only for the elite adversely affects society in that it is undemocratic and tends to concentrate the poor and problem students of the nation in clusters who often have limited access to, involvement in, or knowledge of "good schools."

School Boards benefit from whatever success is achieved in their district by whatever governance or choice structure. Is it time for School Boards to embrace the momentum that is sweeping the country? Should School Board members join the market economy and become creative entrepreneurs for students within their districts? The vision to create what works for students and parents in a school district is an awesome responsibility that goes beyond the term of any one School Board member. Boards and eductors alike would do well to consider the often quoted axiom attributed to Michael Eisner of Disney: "Beware of new ideas. Welcome them and treat them royally for someday, one may be king!" Public education is at a crossroad at this juncture in our history. Let us accept the challenge of new governance roles, creative choices determined by parents, and a renewed commitment to excellence in the restoration of American public education.

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